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Feature Profile Elene Lam

Elene Lam is the founder and Executive Director of Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network) and the Migrant Sex Workers Project. She has been involved in both the gender and sex work movements, as well as migrant and labour activism for almost 20 years. She has conducted training and presentations to community members, services providers and policy makers on sex work, migration, anti-oppressive practice and human rights in more than 20 countries, including the United States, Australia, Japan, Hong Kong and Switzerland. She also submitted and presented a brief to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights in Canada and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women of the United Nations in Geneva to advocate for the rights and safety of migrant sex workers. Elene holds a Master of Law, a Bachelor of Law and a Bachelor of Social Work. In 2014, she received a Master of Social Work from York University and is currently doing her PhD in the School of Social Work at McMaster University.

Why did you decide to study Social Work?

I actually started a degree in Business Administration in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, careers in business are highly valued, but as I got into my studies I realized the business world was not where I wanted to be. I was interested in social justice and decided to study social work. Studying social work in Hong Kong was different from studying social work at York. I found the social work program there more about working with only the individual, which perpetuates social control. The framework they taught still blamed the individual for their problems. Working in the sector in Hong Kong was a different experience. The sex worker organization I worked for was grass roots and worked from an anti-oppressive framework. My colleagues were very different, some had formal education, some did not. Some of my colleagues had lived experience. Everyone was valued. The organization was very progressive, and I worked there for sixteen years. It is strange how life is, I didn't think I would continue that work here in Canada.

Why did you choose York University to do your Master of Social Work?

I found York's Social Work program very interesting. I was doing a lot of activism and organizing work when I was living in Hong Kong. I met Professor Maurice Poon in Hong Kong and he told me about York's program and it sounded radical, based on a critical approach. This intrigued me.

When you think back to your time at York University, what are some of your best memories?

It was impactful to learn from a critical perspective. The critical perspective supported me with my own self-reflection and advocacy work. The student body was racialized and very diverse. I had great classmates who were very supportive. It was my first year in Canada, my practice-based research paper (PRP) supervisor Professor Grant MacDonald was supportive and really allowed me to do my PRP on a topic I was passionate about. I did my placement at St. Stephen's Community House and they supported me to develop a project on migrant sex workers issues. I was able to integrate my placement and my PRP. A place like York's social work program with a critical academic platform, provided me opportunities. It is great that a mainstream education program can have this platform and be critical and reflexive, which supported my development.

Did you encounter any challenges when you were studying at York?

When I came to York it was my first year in Canada. The Canadian system was new to me. Since I was part of the majority in Hong Kong I was privileged, experiencing racism in Canada was something I never experienced before. I learned about difference and whiteness when I came here. In Canada, there is a lot of racism, but the systems are invisible. Many social service agencies have racialized staff and the management is usually white. Majority of social service agencies and social work academia are not always radical, they still work from a framework of social control.

What advice would you give to students about bridging theory and practice?

It is very important to have integration of theory and practice, especially in the social work field. The critical perspective allows us to understand how power and knowledge are operated on a theoretical level. However, we also need to understand the everyday life of people, how different organizations and institutions operate, and how to intervene in order to bring social change on a practical level.

You are the founder and Executive Director of an organization called Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network). Tell me the history of how this began and the work your organization is doing?

When I did my placement in the HIV prevention program at St. Stephen's, my supervisors, Randi Reynolds and Nancy Sun were very supportive, and they helped me develop the sex worker program. I worked at St. Stephen's Community House for half a year after I graduated. During my time there I created a grassroots organization called Butterfly, it is independent from St. Stephen's and we work with migrant sex workers. Our team includes York students and community leaders. I really wanted to work with York students because of the critical ideology they work from.

Advocacy is a very important part of our work at Butterfly. Mainstream ideology views sex workers as a problem or that sex work is violence against women. We believe it is a human right to choose sex work. Instead of helping, we do community organizing and leadership building. Many of the sex workers we work with are non-status and are criminalized. We

understand the complexity of the issue. When the government and law enforcement claim that they are going to rescue sex workers, what they mean is they are going to arrest them and deport them and there is no public investigation to find out what happened to them. They disappear. The anti-trafficking movement is further criminalizing sex workers.

Our organization works in partnership with legal clinics, sex workers' rights organizations, migrant workers organizations and human rights workers. We developed strong allies, so we can work together and advocate. We are new organization and currently have seven team members. We received the *Choice Award* and the *Asian Canadian Labour Award in 2016*.

You are currently doing your PhD at McMaster University in Social Work. Do you mind sharing what your dissertation is about?

My doctoral research is an institutional inquiry into the anti-trafficking investigation of migrant sex workers. This research will fill the current knowledge gap by examining the social organization of anti-trafficking enforcement. Its aim is to explore how anti-trafficking investigation is organized, and how the action of law enforcement officers is organized in such a way that migrant sex workers experience an unsafe working environment, and fear of deportation and failure to respect their labour rights.

What does being a York University Social Work Alumni mean to you?

Being a York alumni means I have learned and understood a critical perspective of social work. I received great support from both my professors and classmates. I feel I have a connection to a critical and thoughtful community. The social work community at York gave me a platform to dream and actualize my dreams. It is important that communities and people with resources support other people who may not have not resources to actualize their dreams. That's what many of the students did for me at York. I feel being an alumni is having a connection and feeling part of a community.

To learn more about Elene Lam's organization Butterfly please check out the website

<https://www.butterflysw.org>